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APPARITION OF A FACE IN A CROWD

Eiko's First Solo Performance In Philadelphia's 30th Street Station

DEC 14-JAN 15

By Madison Mainwaring

I asked Eiko Otake to describe her latest work, *A Body in a Station*, which took place this past October in Philadelphia's 30th Street Station. "One woman comes into the station, walks around, lies down, watches people and is watched by them, then leaves," she said in reply. A lot happened in the midst of these seemingly pedestrian actions. Eiko has been dancing for over 40 years with her husband, Koma, in works examining the tenuous divide between animal and human, life and death. Together they have received every institutional award in the book, including the first-ever joint MacArthur grant.



Eiko in the 30th St. Station. Photo: William Johnston.

In each of her four three-hour-long performances presented by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Eiko entered through the station's west-facing double doors. She proceeded to walk very slowly through the main lobby, knees bent, one hand clutching her yellow-cream kimono. Her face, hands, and feet were painted white, geisha-style, throwing her expressions into high relief against a backdrop of harried travelers. The audience—which followed her around with the same undivided attention as that of chicks with a mother hen—could see everything. A breath, exhaled; a strand of her black hair falling across her shoulders; the widening shadow of her clavicle.

Every so often Eiko lifted her long arms up as if in beseeching prayer, and the rest of her gestures had a mournful, elegiac quality. She seemed to be dancing the story of another world—one removed from the marble floors, whirring timetables, and security announcements of the Amtrak hub. Her slow motion invited analogy to natural processes: the greening of a forest in springtime, silt accumulating on a riverbed floor.

After traveling through the lobby for half an hour, Eiko reached the designated performance area of the North Waiting Room (in comparison, I walked the same distance in less than a minute). Here the pace slowed even more. There was a futon, which Eiko sometimes lay on, sometimes lay under. There were also two silk cloths—one white, the other scarlet—in which she buried her slight figure so completely it left one wondering whether she had left through a hidden trap door. Her languid gestures were occasionally interrupted by a staggering fall, or a violent fling of cloth against the wall.

Eiko's dancing demanded a certain degree of patience from the viewer. Each deliberate movement carried the aura of a secret ritual. She had the uncanny knack of arranging her limbs in a way that made them seem abstracted, bones piled at oblique angles rather than a congruent human form. The cumulative effect holds a strange beauty, arresting both the visual and kinesthetic senses. By the third hour of the performance, even the students who came in order to fulfill an assignment stopped checking their phones.

Many people, such as the information agent in the tourist booth, said they "just didn't get it." A few asked what was going on and appeared even more confused when given the answer. "She looks like she needs help," one young woman in a business suit said. Distracted passersby would almost run into Eiko before stopping, shocked as they tried to figure out why so many people were looking at her.

Eiko otherizes the human figure so that it can be more fully examined and experienced. "She makes [the audience] see where they are as if they're seeing it for the first time," said Harry Philbrick, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum. "I keep the work open to interpretation," Eiko said when I asked her about her hopes for the audience, "but I do want to heighten the sense of body. If we think the body is important, then maybe we won't kill each other." The comment made about Eiko needing medical attention was not entirely unwarranted. The hesitant, vulnerable quality of her dancing almost seemed to be asking for it. She reminds us of what we'd all like to forget, especially in this digital age: existence, tied as it is to physicality, is a precarious thing.

This marked Eiko's first solo performance. The 42-year-old creative bond she shares with Koma is so strong that collaborators speak of them as a symbiotic entity, and their performance name features an ampersand rather than a spelled-out conjunction in order to indicate as much. In a poetry series Forrest Gander wrote about them, the drama unfurls between him and her, he and she. Together they have danced the dance of anarchist banners and painted themselves in peeling layers reminiscent of post-bomb Hiroshima. In between, they have asked the most difficult and least answerable questions. But they have done all of this together, and even when their performance dynamic was antagonistic, at times aggressive toward one another, at least the other person was there.

What made Eiko want to strike out on her own? While traveling through the train station, she noticed that most people were alone. "A duet is a solo remembering a shadow," Eiko once stated in her movement manifesto, "and a solo is a duet waiting for a shadow." Instead of reaching towards Koma, Eiko now looked to a cavernous space full of

strangers. This was solitude, embodied. "The more people that came to see me, the more lonely I became," she said when asked.



Eiko in Fukushima, Tomioka. Photo: William Johnston.

In a way, there was a shadow embedded in Eiko's solo. *A Body in a Station* was the second installation in a two-part series, *A Body in Places*. In preparation for her work in Philadelphia, Eiko traveled with photographer William Johnston to Fukushima, where she wandered through the train tracks ravaged by the 2011 nuclear disaster. This scene was the spectral twin to her *Station* performance, the other world haunting her every move. As her flesh brushed up against the marble, the waiting room turned into a tomb-like

reference to those who had already made their departure. Announcements calling for trains to D.C. and Boston reverberated into dark metaphor. However stable our own stations in life might seem, all tickets are numbered, and we are just passing through.

A Body in Fukushima will be on display through April 5, 2015, at the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. For more information please visit pafa.org. For videos documenting *A Body in Places*, go to Eiko & Koma's website, eikoandkoma.org.

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